

THE UNFOLDABLE LORCHA

By HORACE HAZELTINE

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SYNOPSIS.

Robert Cameron, capitalist, consults Philip Clyde, newspaper publisher, regarding anonymous threatening letters he has received. The plot promises a sample of the writer's power on a certain day. On that day the head is mysteriously cut from a portrait of Cameron while the artist is in the room. Clyde has a theory that the portrait was mutilated while the room was unoccupied and the head later removed by means of a string, uncoiled by Cameron. Evelyn Grayson, Cameron's niece, with whom Clyde is in love, finds the head of Cameron's portrait nailed to a tree, where it was had been used as a target. Clyde learns that a Chinese boy employed by Philletus Murphy, an artist living nearby, had borrowed a rifle from Cameron's lodgeworker. Clyde makes an excuse to call on Murphy and is repulsed. He pretends to be investigating alleged infractions of the game laws and speaks of finding the head of an unknown person under the tree where Cameron's portrait was found. The Chinese boy is found dead next morning. While visiting Cameron in his dressing room a Nell Gwynne mirror is mysteriously shattered. Cameron becomes seriously ill as a result of the shock. The third letter appears mysteriously on Cameron's sick bed. It makes direct threats against the life of Cameron. Clyde tells Cameron the envelope was empty. He tells Evelyn everything and plans to take Cameron on a yacht trip. The yacht picks up a fisherman found drifting helplessly in a boat. Cameron disappears from yacht while Clyde's back is turned. A fruitless search is made for the motor boat seen by the captain just before Cameron disappeared. Johnson is allowed to go after being closely questioned. Evelyn takes letters to an expert in Chinese literature, who pronounces them of Chinese origin. Evelyn seeks assistance from a Chinese fellow college student, who recommends him to Yip Sing, most prominent Chinaman in New York. The latter promises to seek information of Cameron among his countrymen. Among Cameron's letters is found one from one Addison, who speaks of seeing Cameron in Pekin. Cameron had frequently heard of Clyde but he had never been in China. Clyde calls on Dr. Addison. He learns that Addison and Cameron were at one time intimate friends, but had fallen out ever since Cameron's denial of having been seen in Pekin by Addison. Clyde goes to meet Yip Sing, sends Johnson attempts to follow him falls into a basement, scratches his ankle and becomes unconscious.

CHAPTER XV.

Amyl Pearls.

Who will deny that a sturdy physique is a valuable asset? Had it not been for a deep chest, a powerful pair of lungs, a heart without a flaw, and an underlying vitality such as is possessed by but a small minority in these degenerate times, I must certainly have succumbed. For, as I learned later, I had inhaled enough carbon monoxide gas to have killed the average man of my age, twice over. The stove on which the cauldron of peanuts steamed was a charcoal furnace, and the tiny space within that back room was impregnated with the heavy poisoned fumes to a distance of four feet and more above the floor.

Sitting on a low stool, bent forward over my sprained ankle, which for relief I had raised and rested across my other knee, I had come in contact with the deadly gas, breathing it without suspicion, until drowsiness intervened and stupor, insensibility, and eventually coma followed.

It is customary, I understand, to employ rigorous treatment in such cases to effect resuscitation. If I am to believe what I have been told of my condition when discovered, I was very far on the way to dissolution. I was, in fact, moribund, and in the eyes of those who carried me from the cellar to an upper room I was already dead. It is perhaps needless to add that no steps were taken to revive me. Even had I been regarded as still living I doubt that I should have received any other treatment.

Providence, however, favored me. I was thrown into a bunk under one of the few open windows of Chinatown, and a door left ajar, by accident, probably, drew across me a current of comparatively pure oxygen. Thus invited, nature reasserted itself, and respiration, which had been temporarily suspended, gradually resumed its office.

With dawning consciousness came acute discomfort. My head and back ached high unbearably, and my ankle, swollen to twice its normal size, shot pains to my thigh. My tongue seemed too large for my mouth and my throat was raw. Later, memory started a train of questions and surmises. A half light admitted through the open window gave unsatisfactory answer as to time and place. It might be dawn, midday or evening. I might still be in the same building into the basement of which I had plunged after the so-called Peter Johnson, or I might be miles away. Yet of one fact I was assured. It was no longer night. Day had come again and eight hours at least must have passed since I stood killing time on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant in which I was to have met Yip Sing.

And, as my mind cleared, there rushed in upon me a recollection of Evelyn's apprehension and of my promise to reassure her not later than eleven o'clock. Suffering as I was, physically, I knew my mental distress at thought of how she must have waited with growing solicitude hour after hour for that expected ringing of the telephone bell; how, indeed, she must, even now, be distraught, not by uncertainty, but by the conviction that some ill—some serious ill—had befallen me, was more poignant.

In my eagerness to relieve at once this unrest which I knew to be hers I would have risen, but my strength was not equal to the test. My muscles refused to obey my will and I lay supine, inert, powerless. I would have learned the time, but to seek my watch, which I fondly fancied was still in my pocket, seemed such an enormous exertion that I reluctantly gave over the idea. To breathe, to draw air into my lungs and expel it, was prodigious labor, wearying me, it appeared, to exhaustion; though with every inhalation lucidity of thought

and, I suppose, physical force as well, were being imperceptibly augmented. After a time I found myself listening intently for sounds that might prove informative, while with head slightly turned I made scrupulous inventory of the room in which I was cribbed. It was a cramped, confined place, unplastered, and furnished with four rough board bunks, one of which I occupied. The other three were empty; but in the scant passageway between my resting place and that opposite was a stool, and upon the stool the pipe and other paraphernalia peculiar to opium smoking.

Then, very slowly, there came to me a realization of the vulpine cunning of these orientals into whose hands I had fallen. I was to be found here, dead, not from inhalation of foul air in an ill-ventilated cellar, which might excite suspicion and provoke inquiry, but from over-indulgence in opium, to which I had probably been addicted for years, unknown even to my closest friends. For though there is some sympathy, no matter what his position, and my family would hesitate, therefore, to prosecute, preferring to avoid unpleasant publicity.

Yes; it was very clear they had thought me dead, and so had left me here unwatched and unattended with the evidence of my mode of passing theatrically displayed beside me. It only remained now for some employe or visitor to discover me and give the alarm.

I had about reached this conclusion, after a long and desperately trying effort at logical reasoning, when my straining ears detected the sound of footsteps in the passage. The door of the den was slightly ajar and I lay well in sight of any passer-by who should glance through the narrow opening.

Whether to feign death, or boldly make known my recovered consciousness, was for just a moment a question. But before my sluggish brain could decide, choice was snatched from me. The footsteps paused, and simultaneously, it seemed, the door swung farther inward, disclosing, not the picturesque, gray-shrouded Mongolian I had expected, but a white woman, tall and shapely, with hair of iron gray and the very kindest eyes that ever I looked into.

I made as if to speak, but my swollen tongue refused to perform its office, and something that may best be described as a gurgle was the result. With that she came to my side, and for a little regarded me silently. I felt that seeing the pipe and the little peanut-lamp, she must draw the natural inference, and, though there was no reproach in her look, I wished, if possible, to correct that false impression. I therefore made effort to gesture denial, employing a glance to indicate the objects and a very feeble side movement of the head to express repudiation.

It is possible that she understood, but I question that she believed. I have no recollection that she spoke a single word to me, and yet, when she was gone, I felt that she would surely return to my rescue. And I was not misled. I suppose this partial relief to my anxiety resulted in a slackening of mental effort on my part, for I must confess that what followed is very vague in my memory. I know only that she was accompanied by two men, one white and one yellow, who carried me down a narrow flight of stairs, out onto the street and into a waiting cab. I cannot recall that I spoke, but I learned afterward that I had mumbled the word "Loyalton," and thither she accompanied me.

There a physician came, one whom I had never seen before; and I was dosed with aromatic spirits of ammonia and made to breathe oxygen through a funnel, by a white-clad nurse, who also, at intervals, pained my ankle with iodine, and, whenever I attempted to speak, domineered me in a gentle and perfectly ladylike manner to silence.

With regard to sending word to Evelyn Grayson, however, I was insistent; and though she had refused absolutely to grant my curiosity in other respects, she set my mind at rest on this point by informing me that Miss Grayson had called up the Loyalton by telephone several times and had been informed of my condition five minutes after my arrival at my chambers.

There were times during the week which followed when I was nigh unto death; and when, finally, after ten days I was pronounced convalescent, it was with the added well-worn phrase that my recovery was "nothing short of a miracle."

It was on the eleventh day that I was first permitted to see and talk with Evelyn. My mother had called daily, sitting in silence beside my bed, but no other visitor in all that time, seemingly endless period, had been admitted to my room. My curiosity was by now very keen to learn what had developed in the interval regarding the Cameron mystery. Had he, by chance, been heard from? What had the detective agency reported concerning Philletus Murphy? And what, I wished to know most of all, had Yip Sing discovered?

factor than my craving for sight of her and for the music of her voice, and my only regret was that the understanding between us had not reached the stage of acknowledged betrothal; which, I make haste to add, was certainly no fault of mine. Weak as I was my arms ached to fold her in a reassuring embrace; yet I must content myself with a mere fervent hand-clasp and an oral declaration that I was by no means so feeble as I appeared.

Nevertheless I was delighted to see that she gave small evidence of the strain she had been under. Save for a slight additional pallor she was still the same wholesome-looking, thoroughly-poised girl of a fortnight ago. And my admiration for her took on an added measure because of this renewed evidence of her sterling courage.

"And you promised me to be discreet!" she reproached, her smile retreating, her hand still in mine. "I did not foresee such provocation to indiscretion." I pleaded, with an attempted gaiety of tone that must have seemed incongruous. "To have been discreet under the circumstances would have involved a repetition of the one mistake for which you blamed me. You don't know, of course, why I jumped down a ladder into a pitch-black cellar, do you?"

"I know you were in pursuit of some one—a pickpocket," they say, who had taken your watch."

"Do they say that?" I asked, interested.

"That is what Miss Clement learned."

"Miss Clement?" I queried. "Who is Miss Clement?"

"Oh, I forgot that you don't know. Miss Clement is the missionary who found you in the—is it 'hop joint' they call it?"

"The lady with the kind eyes?"

"At my designation her face brightened respectively."

"You remember her, then?" she cried, delightedly. "Hasn't she kind eyes? And she doesn't believe them, either. She's just the dearest, most self-sacrificing creature I ever knew."

"For the moment we had both forgotten Mrs. Lancaster, and when I would have apologized I found that my nurse had carried her off into the next room and was interestingly showing her some framed photographs of the Siena cathedral."

"And Miss Clement learned that I pursued a pickpocket?" I went on, when Evelyn had drawn a chair near me and sat down. "A very clever explanation to account for the disappearance of my watch, but not the true one. As a matter of fact, the person I followed was a miscreant of a deeper dye. When I last saw him, previous to this encounter, he was known as Peter Johnson."

"Wide-eyed, the girl stared at me for an instant. "Peter Johnson!" she repeated, slowly. "So, I was right. He was in the plot. He had something to do with Uncle Robert's disappearance. He was the one who broke the amyl pearls on board the yacht."

It was my turn now to start. Of what was this young woman talking? "Amyl pearls!" Was I mad, or was she?

She saw my perplexity, and hastened to enlighten me.

"Oh, dear, Phillet!" she exclaimed. "I forgot again. There is so much to tell you. Really, I hardly know when to begin. Miss Clement has been of such aid to us! She is what they call an 'independent missionary.' That is, she has no affiliation with any of the church societies or reform associations. For fifteen years she has been working in Chinatown among the white women, and she knows the place and the people as if she were indeed one of them. I had her out at Cragholt for a day and I've seen her four or five times here in town, and she has explained, or at least given quite reasonable surmises, concerning many of the incidents that seemed to me inexplicable. Did you ever hear of amyl pearls?"

"Of course I had heard something of amyl pearls, and I said so. 'They are glass capsules,' I added, 'and contain a liquid which smells like bananas. They use them, I believe, in heart attacks, by crushing them in a handkerchief and inhaling the drug.'

But it was not the same drug, Evelyn explained. Miss Clement had told her all about it. She doubted that it was an amyl, at all, though it was put up in the same fashion, and released in the same way, and it was like an amyl, in that it was extremely volatile.

"Miss Clement has never seen one of them," Evelyn continued, "but some of the Chinese have told her of them, and of the wonders that they perform. She says the chemical, whatever it is, is very expensive and so they are seldom used, but that in China, especially in secret government enterprises, they are employed to make invisible the person who uses them. Really, they don't do anything of the sort; for they are nothing more nor less than capsules, filled with a peculiarly-acting anesthetic—an anesthetic so quick and powerful in its action that the victim falls into insensibility without warning, and emerges, after an interval of ten or twelve minutes, without knowing that he lost consciousness or that more than a single second has elapsed."

"The idea seems ingenious," I returned. I was interested, surely, but very far from convinced. "But," I objected, "how is it that the anesthetic is not anesthetized himself?"

"Oh, he doesn't break the pearls under his own nose," Evelyn explained. "He casts them." The slightest concussion fractures the shell, and every one within a certain radius drops instantly into a temporary trance."

"And the swine before whom, the pearls are cast, do they drop to the ground to rise again when the ten or twelve minutes are concluded?" I ridiculed.

"Oh, not at all. Your muscles are not relaxed. You stand or sit as if turned suddenly to stone. If your arm is extended, for instance, it remains in that position until the effect ceases." She was very much in earnest, and tried to persuade me that, aided by these pearls, it would be a very easy matter to commit all three of the deprecatory acts which had so amazed and shocked us.

I am the last man to regard anything as impossible in this day of wonders, yet I was by no means willing to accept such a solution merely on the hearsay evidence of a woman who had spent a decade and a half amongst the Chinese of New York City.

"Yes, Evelyn," I said, tolerantly, "it is worth considering, and at the first opportunity I shall look into it. But just now there must be more important matters for you and me to discuss. Did Miss Clement, by any chance, see Yip Sing?"

"At the question the girl's pale cheeks flushed to her temples and her violet eyes blazed.

"I asked her to see him, and she did," was her answer. "I thought she might learn from him when and where you parted, and what led up to the plight in which you were found. But he told her that you had failed to keep an engagement with him. He insinuated that you had come to Chinatown intent upon making trouble, and ended by declaring that he had no time to devote to answering the conundrums of such a harebrained American as you had proved yourself. Did you ever hear of such impertinence? I wanted Miss Clement to take me to him that I might tell him what I thought of his outrageous conduct, but she refused. She says he stands very high amongst his people, and that it is not well to antagonize him."

I smiled at her indignation. "After all," I said, "he isn't so much to blame. I must have cut a rather undignified figure chasing Mr. Johnson through Doyers street, and then falling down cellar stairs. When I am able to get out again, I shall go to Mr. Yip and apologize."

But before I was able to get out again, I changed my mind. To be quite definite I changed it that same evening, when, in reading the reports of O'Hara, the detective who for nearly two weeks had been shadowing the red giant, Philletus Murphy, I came upon this entry:

"At 5:27 he entered the Mott street store of the Yip Sing Company, remaining until 6:42, when he came out with a tall, thin, well-dressed Chinaman, said to be Yip Sing, himself. Together they went to Ching Wong's restaurant on Doyers street. From there a Chinaman known as Muk Chuen returned with Murphy to Cos Cob."

And the date of this occurrence was the day following my Chinatown misadventure.

CHAPTER XVI.

A Slump in Crystal Consolidated.

The week of my convalescence was not eventful. Evelyn and Mrs. Lancaster called daily, and the reports from O'Hara came each morning with unvarying regularity and equally unvarying lack of import. The artist, after his visit to Yip Sing, had returned to his Cos Cob hermitage, accompanied by a successor to his former unfortunate Chinese servant, and now rarely left his own grounds. Grieved with suggestion as his appearance in Chinatown had seemed to me, I soon came to realize that it might possibly bear no more vital significance than that altogether commonplace proceeding of the quest of a cook. And in the absence of any confirmatory evidence to the contrary, and with the knowledge gleaned from Miss Clement that Yip Sing, on occasions, added to his regular business of merchandizing that of an employment agent, I saw no reason to attach an undue importance to the incident. Nevertheless I relinquished none of my suspicions regarding Murphy, but continued the detective's surveillance with a fresh injunction to vigilance. And I did not apologize to Yip Sing.

Miss Clement, to whom I believe I owe my life, visited me at my request. How I welcomed her with my gratitude is no more material than how she en-

deavored to make light of her services to me, declaring that such offices were a part of her day's work in her chosen field, and that her day's work was her passion. And yet it was this part of our interview which gave me my strongest insight into her exceptional, if worthy character. Absolutely unselfish, she joyed in a life that even a religious fanatic might well have quailed before; finding flowers in muck heaps and jewels amid tinsel.

In five minutes, too, I glimpsed her abounding magnetism, the moving agent in that rare efficiency which was part and parcel of her. Later, I learned of the weight of her influence among the dwellers in the Chinese colony; not from any direct narrative of what she had accomplished—for she was chary of speaking of herself—but by deduction, purely. Moreover, my watch, a few trinkets and a little money, taken from me that night in Doyers street, had all been returned through Miss Clement's good offices; and if, thus far, she had afforded us no real clue in our absorbing exigency, coupled with her resourcefulness, would prove to us of unbounded value. And, as events shaped themselves, I was not wrong.

It was now nearly four weeks since Cameron's disappearance, and a feat that he had met death in some fendish form at the hands of his abductors had come to be with me very nearly an obsession. The care I exercised in hiding my real state of mind from Evelyn could not well be exaggerated. When I appeared to her most hopeful I was actually most despairing. With Miss Clement, however, I had no reason to dissemble. With all frankness I told her of my despair; and when, instead of trying to comfort me with empty words of encouragement she agreed with me that the chances of our ever seeing Cameron again were at a minimum, I liked her the better for being straightforward.

"I sometimes feel," I said to her, making full confession, "that we made a terrible mistake in not at once notifying the authorities. Even now I am inclined to lay the matter before them. Anything would be better than uncertainty. A few arrests and the third degree might work wonders."

"Where would you start?" she asked in a blunt, logical way that reminded me of Evelyn's faculty of going to the root of things. "You see, you know so little. The story about the portrait and the mirror, the police would regard as more amusing than convincing. And besides, you haven't any proof. Yip Sing, you tell me, has the only original letter, and by this time he may have lost it or have forgotten that he ever had it. If you had seen as much of the Chinese as I have, you would appreciate how wily they are. My belief is that the police would conclude that Mr. Cameron fell overboard from his yacht and was drowned. Indeed it would be fortunate if they did not take the view that he jumped overboard and committed suicide. Or, worse still, it would not be beyond them, Mr. Clyde, to charge that you pushed him over. The yellow papers would almost certainly intimate such a possibility." Had some one else voiced this suggestion I should probably have resented it, but I understood Miss Clement. She was as kind as her eyes indicated; and that is speaking very strongly.

"Nevertheless," I said, with growing determination, "I shall make the case public. It is my duty, and I am willing to run all the risks you point out. I shall start by making a complaint against Peter Johnson. We'll have him arrested, get his record, and follow along that trail until we turn up the other conspirators. If poor Cameron's shares fall in the market, they'll have to fall. If the notoriety precipitates a delayed fatality of which Cameron is the victim, it cannot be helped. I simply will not longer shoulder the responsibility of silence."

The way she had of silent deliberation was almost masculine. I can see her, even now, as she sat there that afternoon, her hair the same shade of gray as her cloth gown, her fresh, clear complexion lined in thought, her kindly eyes half closed. For the better part of a minute she pondered. Then, suddenly, her face awoke, and she asked me:

"Will you wait three days longer? That is all. I have channels of information that are closed to the police, even. There are men in Chinatown, and women too, who would lay down their lives for me. I think some of them would even betray their friends, which is still a greater sacrifice. Wait three days, Mr. Clyde, and if at the end of that time I have not learned for you what you want to know, go on with your publicity idea."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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